DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 410 610 CS 509 570

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TITLE The Medium and the Spirit: On Teaching Religion and Film.
PUB DATE 1997-03-00
NOTE 14p.; Paper presented at the Annual Joint Meetings of the Popular Culture Association and the American Culture Association (San Antonio, TX, March 26-29, 1997).
PUB TYPE Guides - Classroom - Teacher (052) -- Opinion Papers (120) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Adult Education; *Consciousness Raising; Course Descriptions; *Critical Viewing; Film Criticism; *Film Study; *Popular Culture; *Religion; *Religious Factors; Visual Literacy
IDENTIFIERS *Film Viewing

ABSTRACT

To raise the consciousness of adults regarding their mental and social processing of popular media, specifically movies, a course was implemented through a Colorado Episcopal parish's adult education program. The course was designed to show students how to better understand the ways in which their presuppositions create meaning in what they view as well as how they allow what they view to alter their own ideas. By course end, participants had a better grasp of how the divine encounters people in their seemingly most mundane moments--that is, watching movies. Films included in the course were: "Star Wars"; "The Graduate"; "Crimes & Misdemeanors"; "Priest"; and "Unforgiven." Objectives for the course were for students to: (1) attune to media messages, especially in film, more accurately than before the course began; (2) recognize and read the rudimentary language of movies, the visual and aural tools used by filmmakers to communicate their messages; (3) understand and state the arguments made by filmmakers about religious topics, whether or not they are presented overtly; and (4) make informed judgments about the content of such films. The course, which was team taught by a film student and a Bible scholar, was evaluated as successful based on the achievement of the stated objectives in the unique culture of the church. (Author/NKA)

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ED 410 610

The Medium and the Spirit: On Teaching Religion and Film

by

Torey L. Lightcap

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A paper presented to

The Twenty-Seventh Popular Culture Association Annual Meeting
and
The Nineteenth American Culture Association Annual Meeting

March 26-29, 1997
Marriott Rivercenter Hotel, San Antonio, Texas

Film Panel

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Abstract

To raise the consciousness of adults regarding their mental and social processing of popular media, specifically movies, a course was held through a Colorado Episcopal parish's adult education program.

The designers of the course intended to show students how to better understand the ways in which their presuppositions create meaning in what they view as well as how they allow what they view to alter their own ideas. By course end participants had a better grasp of how the divine encounters us in our seemingly most mundane moments--that is, watching movies.

Objectives for the course were: (1) to attune to media messages, especially in film, more accurately before the course began; (2) to recognize and read the rudimentary language of movies, the visual and aural tools used by filmmakers to communicate their messages; (3) to understand and state the arguments made by filmmakers about religious topics, whether or not they are presented overtly; and (4) to make informed judgements about the content of such films. The course, which was team taught by a film student and a Bible scholar, was evaluated as successful based on the achievement of the stated objectives in the unique culture of the church.

Introduction

"If I liked that movie, would I like this one?"

"That film bothered me, but I don't know why."

"I just saw *Seven*, and I think I ought to be offended."

I heard these comments about movies--and many, many more--from my fellow parishioners Sunday after Sunday, week after week, almost as soon as I had settled into a new church in Castle Rock, Colorado. The people of Christ Church (Episcopal) were by nature sign-seekers and broad of mind. Some, like my wife and I, had walked into the church almost as if by accident but quickly found ourselves calling it home, coming more often, eventually taking leadership in its direction.

It seemed natural that by learning to care for each other, to communicate our best and worst moments, we would learn what made each other tick. When I mentioned one Wednesday evening that I was interested in movies, the deluge came from nowhere: "Have you seen...?"

My brother-in-law Wayne Whitney, who holds a Ph.D. in New Testament Studies, caught the movie wave and suggested we work up an idea for a class involving religion and not-necessarily religious films. "You know," he said, "how do we watch ourselves watch movies? How do we use movies to relate to God?"

"You mean how do we use movies to appreciate our divinity?"

One question led to another, and a question to an answer, and an answer to a source on religion and cinema. By the end of the summer we had a purpose and a plan, and on October 30th we initiated the first ever media course at Christ Church: "'The Force Will Be With You, Always': Active Faith and Contemporary Cinema."

Schematics

But let me back up a few months. After agreeing on a time for our class--Wednesday evenings for six weeks beginning in November as part of the church's Adult Education program--we crafted a series of lesson plans designed to make maximum use of our weekly 90-minute meetings. The first 45 minutes were dedicated to some topic of relevance, for example, photography, iconography, or methods of filmic valuation such as auteur theory. Such subject areas, we believed, would increase class members' depth of understanding with regard to both cinematic issues and art as a function of religious value or opinion.

Next we created an eight-page list of cinematic definitions, which I have also made available with copies of this paper in addition to the syllabus. Our intent in the creation of this document was not to spoon-feed students but to give them the verbal tools to communicate their feelings about the films they would watch in the limited time we had scheduled.

We decided that in addition to our weekly Wednesday meetings, our class needed to meet as a group on Fridays at 7 p.m. in the church's library to view the movie slated for discussion the following Wednesday. Attendance at Friday evenings was strongly encouraged since it is always helpful to watch a movie in the company of other class members. Class members unable to attend these sessions were encouraged to rent the movie to be discussed before the designated class session and, if possible, to watch the movie with people willing to discuss what they had seen; we knew from experience that absent a recent viewing, even those who had watched the film before would not be fully prepared to contribute.

Lesson Plans and Discussions by Week

Week 1: Wednesday (30 October): Introduction/Film Language
Friday (1 November): *Star Wars*

The course was introduced by discussing the ubiquity of mass media: how they continually send messages to us that we either don't bother to discern or don't have the tools to take apart; how not paying mediated messages the proper attention can be to our detriment if they are blindly or unconsciously accepted; and what we can do to combat our ignorance and apathy as well as supplement our own cultural and religious knowledge. Then we moved to a specific discussion of films as a medium and as an art form with a language and texture of their own.

Next, class members watched a videotape of Roger Jacquet's short film *An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge*. After a brief discussion of initial reactions, I again showed the film, stopping at critical moments to indicate what technical devices were being employed by the filmmakers. This is a standard practice and a standard film for most first meetings of "Film as Lit" courses. In most cases I was able to refer students to a handout of cinematic definitions which contained more comprehensive definitions of the terms under discussion as well as examples from other movies. Most contributed to the dialogue by mentioning similar experiences from films they had recently seen in addition to particular scenes that stood out in memory.

To end the class, I gave a brief assignment: watch at least one movie during the next week with the list of definitions and ask yourself: What are the filmmakers saying? How are they saying it? Do I agree? Why or why not? What might the title of the film mean? Finally, how does *Star Wars* function in this whole context?

Week 2: Wednesday (6 November): Reader Response/Discuss *S W*
Friday (8 November): *The Graduate*

Wayne began the class by leading a 45-minute lecture and discussion of the reader-response method as one way of "reading" films. He divided film readers into the categories analytical, submissive, and resistant; class members responded by talking about which categories they tend to fall into. They mentioned specifically how films that challenge them to watch carefully can unwittingly lead them to adopt a different category of readership.

We then moved into a dialogue over *Star Wars*. While it was important to me that members of the class understand the elemental themes of this film, it was equally as important for me to have them understand that *Star Wars* is successfully novel in the way it presents those themes so overtly; for example, that with the slightly possible exception of Han Solo (Harrison Ford), characters are easily identifiable as being either fundamentally good or bad people. While they are groundbreaking techniques, George Lucas' uses of color, costumes, dialogue, technology, and characterization paint with broad strokes the ancient mythological quests made manifest by writers such as Homer and thinkers such as Carl Jung and Joseph Campbell.

Our discussion took us naturally to the yin and yang of the film, the characters of Obi-Wan Kenobi (Sir Alec Guiness) and Darth Vader (animated by David Prowse and voiced by James Earl Jones). These were clearly identified by students as possessing god-like characteristics tending toward good and evil, respectively--as Trinitarian and Mephistophelean in nature.

To end, we talked about what to look for while watching *The Graduate*.

Week 3: Wednesday (13 November): Photography/Discuss *The Graduate*
Friday (15 November): *Crimes & Misdemeanors*

The third session started with a lecture on the elements of cinematography. Basic operating principles such as frame and proscenium arch were discussed as ways of "seeing" in film. I continued by introducing camera angle (high/low), distance from subject (close-ups/long shots), color, weighting, and film stock as necessary ingredients for better understanding characters, stories, and messages. We then discussed the traditional realistic-classic-formalist continuum as a method for characterizing films. To increase students' understanding of these categories, some class members suggested recent film titles and others attempted to determine where they would fall on the continuum. Some students mentioned how they had realized how far-reaching their interests in movies actually were.

Wayne led the next half of the class, painting *The Graduate* as fundamentally a cautionary tale of one-sided passion that festers in the middle of a struggle between aimless youth and superficial parenthood. Such an assumption for a movie may allow it to assume both tragic and comical proportions, as happens in *The Graduate*. When pressed, class members discussed how the film's chaos and hostility, tempered with the ultimately unsettling relationship of Ben and Elaine, created feelings of conflict within themselves that they could not necessarily name but yet felt familiar.

This point led us into a discussion of ancient roles both mythological and spiritual: Mrs. Robinson as a seductress who suffers a fall; Ben as victim, predator, seducer, and, in the end, victim of the hero's journey; most parents as well-meaning but misguided elders; and Elaine as prey abducted to exact revenge on the seductress.

Week 4: Wednesday (20 November): Woody Allen/Discuss *C&M*
Friday (22 November): *Priest*

This class began with an hour of introduction to the films of Woody Allen and auteur valuation as yet another way of characterizing films. Short clips from several of the films produced over his 32-year career as a director were shown to establish the framework for *Crimes & Misdemeanors.* Key themes emphasized were his evolving views of comedy, relationships, morality, and religion.

Discussion over this film as a treatise on divinity elicited some of the best thinking the students did in the entire six weeks. Wayne expressed that for him the film constructed an ethically grounded theology of redemption and healing; that an omnipresent God, though detailed here by a Jewish filmmaker, can still transcend the Old Testament view of godhood and wrath.

Several class members vigorously contested this view in light of the scene in the film in which Judah Rosenthal (Martin Landau), having had his mistress killed, remembers a Passover seder with his family. "That which originates in a black deed," Judah's father tells him, "will blossom in a fall." They voiced their belief that Judah could not have been delivered from his sin--that the grief arising from his actions would always be with him.

One class member viewed the film's conception of religion as a communal experience and believed that in this context, through interaction with his moral community, Judah's violation would eventually dissipiate. Still another class member refused to accept any of Woody Allen's art as morally valid because, she said, his life is morally vacuous. This final point enabled excellent dialogue at the following class about the value and difficulty of dissociating the art from the artist.

Week 5: Wednesday (4 December): Iconography/Discuss *Priest*
See Before Next Class: *Unforgiven*

Lecture and discussion for the fifth class were a combined effort examining iconography and homosexuality in films.

Agreeing that movies can have an innate relationship with religion, Wayne theorized iconic energy as the reader response to the power of symbol expressed in some form of desire. Whether tactile or voyeuristic, desire in the movie viewer increases in proportion to the level of realism of onscreen icons. The real power of movies, then, lies in the industry's use of conventions such as behavioral norms, audience expectations, attitudes, and perceived levels of self-esteem.

Next, Wayne presented a brief history of homosexuality in movies--from a demonstration reel shot by Thomas Edison to Marlene Dietrich to *The Lost Weekend* to 1950's cross-dressing comedies to the ambivalence of *Midnight Express* to issue movies such as *Philadelphia* and *Priest*.

Our ensuing discussion of *Priest* unearthed several dichotomies of old versus new. As historically Catholic infidels, we Episcopalians found ourselves especially attuned to these issues. The main character Greg, a gay priest, embodies the the heart of each dichotomy: The presence of old-world values in a profoundly new world. Thinking perhaps of the Protestant Reformation--revolution against the high, unreachable station of the Church--we looked at the film to draw a gneral statement about Catholicism: The Church's ideas are outdated and proscriptive, but some of the laity and clergy are willing to revolt to change those ideas. On the whole, class members were disappointed not at the many ethical and moral questions raised by the film but by the quick solutions the filmmakers offered at the last minute.

Week 6: Wednesday (11 December): Synthesis experience with *Unforgiven*

Ending the course successfully required us to find some clear way of bringing movie watching and contemporary faith together. To accomplish this task we elected to view an entire film as a theology.

The session began by introducing the Western as a genre, then briefly expanding into genre studies as yet another tool for characterizing films. In a group exercise class members tried to list every cliché from Westerns they could think of with respect to costumes, setting, dialogue, characters, and plots. We then discussed how almost each of those clichés was necessary in the past for the continuance of the Western; however, we also noted how the makers of *Unforgiven* violated or in some way mutated each of those conventions. Examples include prolonged moments of brutal violence instead of quick, clean, and remote killing; the questionable motives of each character rather than clearly delineated character types; and an almost universal respect for brown headgear over black or white.

Violating existing sensibilities about Westerns, we decided, allows previously unforseen artistic possibilities to emerge. Previously well-defined roles of moral authority and "goodness" now gone, any main character is free to step into the position of authority if he or she can maintain it. The character of William Munny, who assumes authority in the morally languid Big Whiskey, Wyoming, not only maintains but also exceeds his place of authority and becomes the Father, God, and Legend of the town. The characters that follow Munny to Big Whiskey, as well as those that encounter him there, all play crucial roles in the theology.

Conclusion

Not every church can afford to host a class so intentionally aggressive; the arts and our relation to them are sensitive subjects indeed. But due to many factors including the demographics of its members, the outlook of its leaders, and its culture of hopeful trust, Christ Church is in fact both unique and safe for such experiments. We parishioners like to say that everytime we meet, we create a "container" for the work to be done.

We are preparing now to take the next step in our journey with religion and cinema. With the exception of *Priest*, the sessions for this class dealt with the messages of not-necessarily religious films. For the Fall 1997 session, Christ Church's second stride into media education will examine movies with overtly religious themes and settings such as *King David*, *Jesus of Montreal*, and *The Ten Commandments*. I hope to bring you more of my findings--but then, that's a different paper.

If you can't believe a little in what you see on the screen, it's not worth wasting your time on cinema. —Serge Daney (1944-92), French film critic.

THE FORCE WILL BE WITH YOU, ALWAYS: ACTIVE FAITH & CONTEMPORARY CINEMA

WITH

TOREY L. LIGHTCAP & WAYNE WHITNEY

DESCRIPTION

Mass media are awash with images and sounds that build and reinforce ideas concerning religion. In order to recognize media portrayals for what they really are, we must break down our conventional habits of allowing those images to continuously wash over us. When we begin to think for ourselves about movies—and, perhaps, think more critically about them—we see that they contain a wide spectrum of representations on the subject of our association with (or dissociation from) the divine. Some of these representations may prove fruitful in our individual searches to find our place(s) in the universe.

PURPOSE

To raise the consciousness of adults regarding their mental and social processing of popular media, specifically movies. Issues explored include values dysphoria (cringing) and visceral resonance (acquiescence). Students will better understand how their presuppositions create meaning in what they view as well as how they allow what they view to alter their own ideas. By course end participants will have a better grasp of how the divine encounters us in our seemingly most mundane moments—that is, watching movies.

OBJECTIVES

By the end of the course, you should be able to:

- Attune to media messages, especially in film, more accurately than you do now.
- Recognize and read the rudimentary language of movies, the visual and aural tools used by filmmakers to communicate their messages.
- Understand and state the arguments made by filmmakers about religious topics, whether or not they are presented overtly.
- Make your own informed judgements about the content of such films.

The cinema, like the detective story, makes it possible to experience without danger all the excitement, passion and desirousness which must be repressed in a humanitarian ordering of life. —Carl Jung (1875-1961), Swiss psychiatrist.

All you need for a movie is a gun and a girl.

—Jean-luc Godard (b. 1930), French filmmaker.

SCHEDULE

In addition to our weekly Wednesday meetings, we will also meet on Fridays at 7 p.m. in the church's library. Attendance at Friday evenings is strongly encouraged since it is always helpful to watch a movie in the company of other class members. If you cannot attend these sessions, please try to rent the movie to be discussed before the designated class session. Experience shows that even if you have seen the film before, you will not be fully prepared to contribute to the class experience unless the film is fresh in your memory. Remember, truth is in the details!

Week 1: Wednesday, 30 October: Introduction/Film Language
Friday, 1 November: *Star Wars*

Week 2: Wednesday, 6 November: Reader Response/Discuss *S W*
Friday, 8 November: *The Graduate*

Week 3: Wednesday, 13 November: Photography/Discuss *The Graduate*
Friday, 15 November: *Crimes & Misdemeanors*

Week 4: Wednesday, 20 November: Woody Allen/Discuss *C&M*
Friday, 22 November: Open movie night

(No classes during the week of Thanksgiving)

Week 5: Wednesday, 4 December: Iconography/Discuss last film
Saturday, 7 December: *Unforgiven*

Week 6: Wednesday, 11 December: Synthesis experience with *Unforgiven*

Film as dream, film as music. No art passes our conscience in the way film does, and goes directly to our feelings, deep down into the dark rooms of our souls.

—Ingmar Bergman (b. 1918), Swedish stage and film writer, director.

Film is more than the twentieth-century art. It's another part of the twentieth-century mind. It's the world seen from inside. We've come to a certain point in the history of film. If a thing can be filmed, the film is implied in the thing itself. This is where we are. The twentieth century is on film. . . . You have to ask yourself if there's anything about us more important than the fact that we're constantly on film, constantly watching ourselves.

—Don Delillo (b. 1926), U.S. author.